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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 0032
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 ASHGABAT 001142

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [TX](#) [EPET](#)

SUBJECT: NIYAZOV'S GRIM FAIRY TALE - TURKMENISTAN AFTER 15
YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

REF: A. (A) ASHGABAT 1106

[1](#)B. (B) ASHGABAT 1055

[1](#)C. (C) ASHGABAT 1135

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.
4 (B) and (D).

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (C) Amidst the fake joy and practiced pageantry that constituted Turkmenistan's celebration of its 15th year of independence, there was palpable fear and resignation throughout Ashgabat. Teachers took children out of school for two months preceding the events to rehearse for the stadium event and four-hour long parade, and, new to the usual repertoire, to practice riding on attractions at the new \$50 million "Turkmen Fairy Tales" amusement park, which opened to \$500,000 worth of fireworks and closed the next day for lack of a management contract. Main thoroughfares have been blocked for months so that construction could proceed on a \$63 million artificial river, which was so poorly designed, that the river itself is unusable for any recreational activity and the riverwalk is interrupted every few hundred yards by busy roads. And the massive housing demolitions continued unabated to make room for more of Niyazov's vanity projects but mostly to clear space for thousands of tiny sickly pine saplings -- a presidential obsession. Parts of Ashgabat resemble Warsaw in 1944 with the eerie addition of high-rise marble palaces overlooking the rubble. Niyazov's showpiece event, the People's Council (Halk Maslahaty), was shorter and less substantive than in past years. Although he promised to raise government workers salaries and pensions, he also focused the session on fantastic visions of wealth based on increased oil and gas sales/revenue through 2030. The fact that the proceeds rarely reach the people will only

contribute to a general feeling of alienation and helplessness. Niyazov, contrary to the recurring rumors about his health, appeared rested and focused -- as if he plans to stick around until 2030.

¶2. (C) Against this backdrop, many long-time observers see the steady rise of the Ministry of National Security (MNB) still known locally as the "KGB." For the first time, a MNB officer attended a meeting between the Charge and Foreign Minister (ref A), and Turkmenistani authorities have been more blatant in intimidating locals and warning them against engagement with the United States or Europe. Following Charge's September 25-26 visit to Dashoguz (ref B), a local grantee was called in and threatened by the MNB and several other grantees also were called in and requested to return their grants. In Mary Province, following the mid-October visit of a senior USAID official, a kindergarten director grantee was demoted to a smaller school. Authorities in Lebap Province closed down a cafe on October 30 where local children were attending an American Corner sponsored Halloween party and then closed down a smaller event the next day at the American Corner itself. General harassment of RFE/RL reporters continues with authorities cutting phone lines, intermittent surveillance, harassment of family members, and continued threats to the family of local reporter Ogulsapar Myradova, who died in prison in August under mysterious circumstances (ref C).

¶3. (C) The challenges to USG engagement or assistance in this environment are enormous. Embassy and other donors believe that unlike in Uzbekistan, the government will not openly seek to shut us down or kick us out. Rather they will target their own citizens with threats and intimidation in order to discourage contact. USG assistance, therefore, needs to be as non-provocative and inclusive of local

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authorities as possible. Opportunities exist in the areas of agriculture and health. We should be leery of encouraging locals to play in a nasty dangerous game in which the USG can offer little, if any, protection. But more importantly, we need to maintain our assistance levels in order to support the brave locals still willing to engage with us, and maintain our credibility, in case there's an unexpected change in the regime. In addition, we need to encourage friends and allies such as the EU and Japan, to establish a more significant presence here, if only to counter the perception (mostly Moscow-driven) that the United States is trying to invade Russia's near abroad.

¶4. (C) Our diplomatic levers are few and minimally effective, but essential. Last year Turkmenistan unsuccessfully lobbied hard to defeat a UN General Assembly resolution, but this year's lack of a resolution will allow Niyazov to escape international condemnation of his regime. For the first time, this year the government paid attention to one of the USG's annual reports, in this case the USG Foreign Investment Climate report (ref A), but only because the government mistakenly perceived portions of the report as hurting its chances to have an international arbitration case heard before the U.S. Supreme Court. Turkmenistan also has shown interest in not being labeled a Country of Particular Concern vis a vis its Religious Freedom record, and also extension of its waiver under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment concerning freedom of movement. The government also has reacted to a recent attempt by the U.S. Congress to pass a resolution condemning Turkmenistan for its human rights record. The OSCE also is an active force in assisting with human rights in general and with specific cases. Unilateral, but even more so, multilateral entreaties to Turkmenistan will continue to be essential to keeping the spotlight on Niyazov's policies and showing global condemnation of his warped and sadistic vision of a "Golden Century" for the people of Turkmenistan. End Summary and Comment.

Celebrating Niyazov's Health

15. (C) Looking rested and focused, Niyazov enthusiastically took part in a week-long celebration more in honor of him than of Turkmenistan's 15 years of independence. A number of diplomats who were trotted out to the various openings and ceremonies noted that Niyazov seemed barely fatigued at all, whereas the rest of us were worn out. Indeed, Niyazov even had his German doctors flown in for the festivities, who reported that Niyazov's health remained "excellent." Though embassy continues to consider succession scenarios, given Niyazov's performance and general concerns over his health during the past few years, an increasingly likely scenario for the near and medium term is that Niyazov will be in charge for years to come. Though embassy had an opening to pursue democratic reform following EUR/DAS Pascoe's visit in 2004, subsequent events in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have apparently convinced Niyazov that relinquishing control would be a threat to his regime. We can expect Niyazov to further consolidate his control both over the government and over the everyday lives of the people of Turkmenistan, including determining where they live, what they study at school, and how they practice their faith. Continuing rotations of local government officials and appointments drawn from the ranks of security forces point to a regime that values loyalty over competence and stability over open society

The \$500,000,000 Anniversary

16. (SBU) Niyazov chose to celebrate Turkmenistan's 15th year

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of independence with an unprecedented series of openings and lavish spectacles. Scheduled openings included:

- Turkmenistan's "Disneyland" (\$35 million);
- a four-kilometer cable car system in the Kopet Dag mountains overlooking the southern part of the city (\$21 million);
- an artificial river/park complex through southern Ashgabat (\$63 million);
- an "Alp-Arslan National Youth Theater" (\$17 million);
- a new "national library" and cultural center (\$75 million);
- a pyramid-like structure commemorating 15 years of independence (\$4.5 million);
- a massive "Olympic" natatorium complex (\$25 million);
- a new administrative building for the Ministry of Energy (\$19 million).

Of these, only the first four were formally opened with fanfare, the near-mandatory participation of the diplomatic corps and (in all cases except the "Disneyland") a presidential appearance. The authorities decided halfway through October to postpone the opening of the national library until the president's birthday in February. The grand openings for the remaining three buildings, however, were suddenly cancelled after the invitations were sent out, perhaps because the president was preserving his stamina and/or perhaps because was unsatisfied with the progress of the construction.

17. (C) In addition to the openings, Niyazov presided over the annual "Red Square"-like parade, where he stood on the Kremlin-equivalent viewing stand next to the commanders of his security services (Defense, KGB, Border Guards, Police). Niyazov delayed the parade's beginning by an hour in order to meet with a visiting Ukrainian gas delegation, making the whole event, which assembled participants two hours before the parade was planned to begin, a six hour ordeal for parade participants and designated spectators. After the show of requisite military hardware, each district of Ashgabat and each province filed by with a dance troupe that performed a 15 minute routine in front of the president. One Ashgabat district even included American style cheerleaders and

breakdancers, a departure from the president's emphasis on the purity of Turkmen culture. As Charge left about half-way through the parade, she noted to a Turkish construction executive that she was leaving because her son was bored. "Who isn't?" the Turk sighed.

18. (SBU) Conoff attended the requisite stadium event, which was more or less an exact repeat of last year's event with the odd exception of the VIP treatment of the visiting "U.S. delegation." This delegation turned out to consist of a Southern California-based evangelical group who embraced the Ruhnama as a religious text. The group also was given front-row seats at the parade and seated with VIPs at the celebratory horse race. Apparently the leader of the group gave a adulatory interview to Turkmenistan television, though embassy has no evidence the interview was aired. A somber-looking Orazov, Turkmenistan's Ambassador to the United States was assigned chaperone duties, which included trying to introduce the group to embassy representatives at every stop.

Fantastic Wealth and Higher Wages

19. (SBU) The showstopper of the Independence Day activities, the convening of the People's Council (Halk Maslahaty) had all the flag and Niyazov portrait waving of prior years, though several long-time observers noted many of the 2000 members of the session looked more bored and responded less

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enthusiastically than in prior years. The session itself was the shortest on record, with the lion's share of the time devoted to reports of fantastic wealth accruing to Turkmenistan as a result of the president's ambitious 2007-2030 Oil and Gas Plan (details of the plan to be reported septel). Other business included an elections update and the second annual unanimous outburst against holding presidential elections in 2009. When the president asked about preparations for the 2009 presidential elections, Elections Commissioner Garryev responded, "Don't talk about such things!" -- a comment that provoked five minutes of sustained applause. The session also included a formalization of the amnesty decrees freeing 10,056 convicts, though the prisoners had been released the prior week. Niyazov then "surprised" the Halk Maslahaty with an announcement that he would extend the government's policy of providing free natural gas, electricity, water, and salt from 2020 till 2030, that gasoline prices (approximately six cents a gallon at the unofficial rate) would remain constant until 2030, and that he would double salaries of all government employees, student stipends, pensions, and handicapped benefits effective January 1, 2008.

Ascent of Turkmenistan's KGB

110. (C) Concurrent with these celebrations was the steadily increasing influence of the MNB, referred to locally as the "KGB." One of the most blatant manifestations of this influence was the presence of a MNB Deputy Minister during Charge's October 22 meeting with Foreign Minister Meredov to discuss a case being considered by the U.S. Supreme Court. During this meeting Meredov also took Charge to task for embassy officials' meetings with the relatives of exiled Turkmenistani "opposition figures," even though these meetings occurred months ago and Charge had seen Meredov frequently in the interim. Charge's preliminary take on the MNB's presence was control over Meredov. Subsequently a long-time resident EU representative, who usually gets it right, reported to embassy that in fact Meredov had now been co-opted by the MNB. "It makes sense," this source reported, "Meredov's a lawyer and also is in the best position to know of any locals engaged with USG or other international programs." This source confirmed growing embassy suspicions that, unlike in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan would not directly

shut down or oust foreign entities considered to be fomenting revolution or unrest. Instead security forces would target their own citizens and intimidate and threaten them into not engaging with the United States and other donors. Examples of this intimidation include threatening grantees who met with Charge during a September 25-26 visit to Dashoguz Province, demoting a kindergarten teacher grantee in Mary Province who met with a visiting USAID official and closing down two attempts to hold a children's Halloween party, one at a private cafe and one at the American Corner in Lebap Province.

¶11. (C) In addition, threats and intimidation of RFE/RL-related locals continues. As reported ref C, the daughter of deceased journalist Ogulsapar Myradova was called in and threatened with a fate "worse than her mother's" if she continued to talk to U.S. or European diplomats, and harassment continued of the family of Pen Club Award winner Rahim Esenov, who currently is in Moscow rehabilitating after surgery.

¶12. (C) Embassy also has noticed an increased number of security officials taking non-security positions, including the appointment of security officers as the new Chief of Customs and the Governor of Dashoguz Province. For now, these observations only point to a trend, but embassy will

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continue to monitor indications of continued rise of MNB influence.

How We Can Help

¶13. (C) The need for continued U.S. assistance programs is even more acute in the atmosphere described above. Though risks to private citizens of engagement with us have grown, more and more Turkmenistanis still are willing to take the risk. Almost all engagement figures are up from 2005, including Internet Resource Center users, Democracy Commission Grants, applicants for USAID grants, and participants in USG-funded workshops and training programs. Embassy continues to believe that local citizens engaging with us know the risks and decide to take them in the hopes of bettering themselves and their local communities. To paraphrase the Polish national anthem, "Turkmenistan is not lost while we live."

¶14. (C) Embassy is uncomfortable in its role as largest bilateral donor by far in Turkmenistan. Not only does it make participants in our programs particularly vulnerable, but also plays into a very active Moscow-driven black propaganda campaign aimed at showing the Americans as hell-bent on over-throwing the existing regimes in Central Asia. It probably is no accident Niyazov allows the proliferation of satellite dishes in the cities so that locals can get a full dose of the Russian view of world events. We are encouraged by recent German initiatives to play a more active role in Central Asia, in particular Foreign Minister Steinmeier's harsh words to President Niyazov during the former's November 2 visit here (to be reported septel). During a series of meetings leading up to Steinmeier's visit, Charge had encouraged visiting German diplomats to join U.S. assistance efforts in order to lower the USG's profile and have more international buy-in. Charge repeated these views to visiting Japanese Central Asian Desk Director Hideki Uyama during an October 23 visit. Uyama agreed with the need for Japan to increase its engagement in Central Asia and noted his government was considering regular consultations on Central Asia both with the EU and the United States.

¶15. (C) The USG also needs to make full use of the diplomatic tools at its disposal. These would have included a country-specific resolution at the UN General Assembly; given the lack of a resolution, we have missed the

opportunity to focus worldwide condemnation on Turkmenistan and again raised the USG's profile as one of the few countries that seems to care about human rights in Turkmenistan. Though USG influence may have slightly waned once Niyazov successfully parlayed U.S. interest in multiple pipelines into a higher gas price from the Russians, he still cares about maintaining the veneer that he's our friend in the Global War on Terror and other security-related themes. Continuing regular VIP visits at the DAS level and below help get us in Niyazov's door and frequently break loose one or more festering issues. PDAS Mann was able to get the government's concurrence on allowing Peace Corps to obtain a satellite dish, for example, an issue that had been unresolved for two years. PDAS Mann also was able to follow up with Meredov to obtain Turkmenistan's sustained vote for Guatemala during the UNSC elections. Embassy yields to the Department on the merits of an A/S Boucher visit. On the one hand, as with Steinmeier's visit, A/S Boucher would be able to deliver a high-level and widely publicized message to Niyazov; on the other, such a high-level visit would play locally to Niyazov's spin on how all the great leaders of the world come to him. Embassy continues to believe that Niyazov also is personally offended by the long gap between U.S.

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ambassadors and, while this may also send a message of overall USG displeasure, it denies embassy the use of a resident "big stick."

¶16. (C) In addition to VIP visits, Congressional interest in Turkmenistan gets the government's attention. The MFA sent back a blistering rebuttal of Senator Brownback's draft resolution on Turkmenistan, for example, though embassy did not provide MFA with a copy. Meredov always has Euronews on in his office and undoubtedly has his staff regularly check the Internet for any information on Turkmenistan. Meredov showed first-time interest in any embassy annual reporting when he requested we revise our Foreign Investment Climate statement, mistakenly thinking that this report would influence U.S. Supreme Court willingness to consider an international arbitration case involving Turkmenistan. Embassy will continue to encourage dialogue on these reports.

¶17. (C) Jackson-Vanik and Country of Particular Concern designation also continue to concern Turkmenistan, though in the former case, the threat of non-continuation of the waiver does not seem to have effected any improvement in freedom of movement since 2005. In the latter case, religious freedom has improved dramatically. Registered religious group generally are able to practice their faith with no harassment.

¶18. (C) Turkmenistan remains primarily interested in security cooperation with the United States and is likely to continue Gas and Go and overflight operations. Niyazov's reluctance to sign a formal divert agreement for Mary Airbase more likely represents fear of Russian or Iranian repercussions than a lack of willingness to provide landing rights to the base in case of emergency. The government also has been remarkably cooperative on letting the USG fund and build border crossing stations on the Iranian and Afghanistani border. The government also believes there are tentative plans for CENTCOM to fund three more border stations. Using lack of progress on human right and democracy as a reason for not continuing with the remaining three stations remains an option.

¶19. (C) And lastly, embassy welcomes increased multilateral focus on Turkmenistan, including OSCE interest as well as the devastating, but (alas) completely unpublicized UN Convention on the Child report. USG channels within the UN should be mobilized to encouraged greater UN involvement on a political level.

¶20. (C) In spite of the increasingly repressive

circumstances, there remains considerable latitude for U.S. and international assistance and diplomatic leverage. The worst scenario for the people of Turkmenistan -- and the best scenario for Niyazov's diabolical plans -- would be for the United States to walk away. Increased funding for programs, continued dialogue at high level and a selective willingness to engage with Turkmenistan demonstrate that we are with the people of Turkmenistan for the long haul.

BRUSH